

Crothers (J. D.)

MEDICAL INSTRUCTION

IN

INEBRIETY

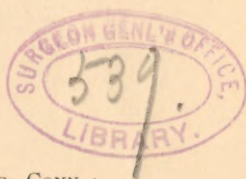
IN

MEDICAL COLLEGES.

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BY

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MEDICAL INSTRUCTION OF INEBRIETY IN COLLEGES.*

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The diseases and injuries which are directly or indirectly traceable to the use of spirits and narcotic drugs, if not increasing, are clearly becoming more prominent every year. Practical physicians, engaged either in general or special practice, assert positively, that alcohol and narcotics are very common causes and always serious complications in most of the diseases they are called to treat. Medical men with hospital and large general practice have estimated that at least twenty per cent. of all cases are suffering from the poison of alcohol and other narcotics. Many of these cases are so-called moderate drinkers, or use spirits at long intervals, or take narcotics irregularly for various purposes. A certain class of cases who drink excessively come for treatment, and the disorders from which they suffer are clearly traceable to the spirits used. Another class have complex disturbances, not so clearly due to spirits, yet recover quickly from the withdrawal of spirits and narcotics. A third class are well-marked inebriates, who appeal constantly to the profession for help, and receive the stereotyped advice to "stop drinking." There is probably not a living physician of any class or school, who has not been called for counsel and help in cases of moderate or excessive drinking.

This is increasing with every advance of scientific knowledge. The degenerations which follow from the use of alcohol, and the disease of inebriety in which the craze for spirits is a symptom, are becoming more and more a recognized fact in practical medicine. Busy physicians find clinically that alcohol is the very genius of degeneration when

* Read before the American Association for the Study and Cure of Inebriety, at New York city.

used as a beverage and continuously. Also that the drink paroxysm and morbid impulse to procure spirits at all hazards, is something more than a moral state or a weak will power. In some vague uncertain way the possibility of disease may be recognized, but how to study and what means to use in the treatment are practically unknown. The text books of medicine give little or no information, and the physician is obliged to turn to moral and ethical lines of treatment. He gives lectures, warnings, appeals, and threats, and possibly placebos, or he may administer secretly remedies to cause nausea, or give narcotics to check the morbid impulses. By these means, he expects to rouse up the weak will, or produce disgust for spirits, and thus give new power to abstain for the future; or by checking the drink impulse by narcotics destroy it. These means fail, and not unfrequently the use of morphine beginning in a prescription ends in its addiction. Chloral, cocaine, and other drugs begun in this way, are equally disastrous. This failure of the family physician to relieve or even to check the inebriety only for a short time, opens the door for all sorts of quack remedies, and charlatan schemes. The recent wild wave of gold cure specifics, with its boastful pretensions, would never have been possible had the physical nature of inebriety been recognized by the family physician and proper treatment given. Thousands of cases in despair of any better means for relief have taken these secret remedies, and received temporary relief, only to realize later that they were more incurable and the drink craze more difficult to control. Thoughtful men in the profession recognize a field of practical work in the scientific study and treatment of the inebriate, but suppose it confined to specialists. In reality, the inebriate is more curable in the early stages, at home under the direction of the family physician. The prevention of inebriety can only be accomplished here, and as in other diseases when the case is neglected until chronic stages come on, the possibility of cure becomes more remote. The use of alcohol alone in a previously healthy person is followed by poisoning with cell and

nerve starvation and central exhaustion. The use of alcohol in an unknown proportion of cases is from the beginning a symptom of derangement and exhaustion, a predisposition, or a demand for relief from some organic suffering. In all these cases poisoning, starvation, and exhaustion are present. Derangements of nutrition, growth, development, and environment, associated with inherited or acquired defects, appear in every case. These are physical facts, the knowledge of which is absolutely essential to the rational treatment. The assertion has been made by reliable authorities that one-tenth of the male population use spirits as a beverage, either in moderation or excess. At least half of this number appeal to medical men for help from disorders due directly or indirectly to the use of spirits. The chronic cases from the lower walks of life, who are inebriates, constitute a class who are ever appealing for medical assistance. Another class higher up and actively engaged in the world's work, yet suffering from the effects of spirits, mutely turn to the family physician for help, and both classes fail, the physician is unable to give relief.

He is unacquainted with this malady; he cannot understand the condition of these poor victims who are whirled rapidly down the road to dissolution by laws and forces that are largely unknown. The physical study of inebriety has reached a point where the facts are sufficiently clear and established to make it possible to teach authoritatively the conditions, causes, and natural progress of inebriety, and to point out certain general therapeutic principles available and practical in its successful treatment. From this study comes the clearest evidence that a large proportion of all inebriates are curable in the early stages, through the family physician's care and wise counsel. His knowledge of the environment and physiological conditions of the patient's life and living, enable him to use means and remedies for cure with very great certainty. The possibility of prevention and cure in the early stages along these lines are fully equal to that of any other disease, when used by the intelligent medical man.

The time has come for a public recognition of this need by the medical colleges of the country. The students who go out without some idea of inebriety from a medical point of view, are unable to treat or counsel wisely the first cases they are called on for help. While they may not be any more incompetent than other neighboring physicians to treat such cases, they are clearly without capacity and knowledge to render assistance that would give them a permanent reputation for the future. The drinking man who sends for the young physician because he is a stranger, hoping for some relief which the family physician has failed to give, is disappointed. The new physician has less knowledge than the elderly man, although he has recently graduated at the head of his class. Had he been taught some general facts of inebriety, it would have been the opening door for a successful practice in the future. There are vast numbers of men and women who are literally supporting armies of quacks and charlatans, simply because the medical men are unacquainted and unable to treat their disorders. The progress of medical science and wider range of instruction given in colleges are slowly and steadily reducing the ranks of these chronic cases. The inebriates constitute the largest class of these defectives, and the few pioneer students who are pointing out the physical side of these cases and the new realm of practice, appeal to medical colleges to instruct its students along this new line of cure and prevention. Every graduating class should have four or five lectures on the general facts which are prominent in the causation and progress of inebriety. This will enable them to not only study these cases, but act intelligently when called for counsel and advice. It is such knowledge as this that will help solve the drink problem and raise its present treatment from the realm of quackery into the field of exact science.

An eminent man in a recent speech said, "I despair of any great progress in this drink question until medical men shall take up this matter and teach us the facts and their meaning." To this I add that the time and literature and

magnitude of the subject call for instruction from our medical colleges. There is a demand that young medical men be equipped with some knowledge of the most numerous cases they will be called on to treat in many circles of life. The theories and delusions concerning inebriety, repeated in every community with the assurance of being positive facts, fail when tested at the bar of accurate inquiry. The supposed popular knowledge is ignorance, and the real facts will appear only from careful examination by medical men. It is from a knowledge of the phenomena of this drink problem only that means for cure and relief can be ascertained. Medical instruction of students along this new line is a need becoming more apparent every day.

